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ADOT wants public input on transportation needs, wants

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Thursday, October 09, 2008

Economic crises never come at a good time or in the right place -- like now, for instance, here in Arizona.

For the last 50 years, the state has experienced one of the fastest growth rates in the nation, straining resources and leaving those who provide basic services playing a game of catch-up.

Gaps in the infrastructure needed to provide for the rising population are growing, not shrinking.

What was bad is now worse.

One of those basic infrastructure needs, transportation, was among those constantly short of money long before the current calamity set in.

A year ago, Gov. Janet Napolitano, realizing there was a clear and present danger to the system, issued ADOT an executive order to identify the statewide transportation shortcomings and look for solutions.

Known as the Statewide Transportation Planning Framework, the project has been looking into transportation needs, alternatives and money, far into the future -- like 20 to 50 years into the future.

It is not a period of time most people can easily get their arms around. But such dates tend to come sooner than later in the larger world. Without a plan, problems that were bad, and then got worse, tend to get out of control.

The framework project is based on two basic premises. First, there is no end in sight to Arizona's population growth. And second the gap between transportation needs and the money to pay for them will continue to grow with the population.

Last January, ADOT began quantifying those needs and identify the money sources available to fulfill them. This statewide collaborative process has become known as "Building a Quality Arizona" or "bqAZ."

"We find ourselves at a defining moment in Arizona's transportation history," says Bill Williams, ADOT spokesman for the Prescott region. "Our funding system has not changed in decades and it's not working."

Williams is one of about two dozen members of a bqAZ committee exploring the issues around the state. The Northern Arizona region includes Yavapai, Coconino and portions of Navajo and Apache counties.

"Funding is decreasing at the same time that demand is increasing," Williams says. "ADOT can't create the funding stream, but we can ask Arizonans to engage in the conversation with us to help find the solution."

At the current rate, he says, there is a real possibility that ADOT will soon become a maintenance department as opposed to a road builder.

At a recent meeting in McGuireville where Williams came to explain the soon-to-be-started Interstate 17 interchange improvements, he also told the attendees of the crucial need for the public's input on the project.

"No one likes new taxes and I'm not advocating new taxes -- I'm advocating for you to get involved. Do you want toll roads, user fees, maybe ask developers to more of the costs or explore new options for public private partnerships?"

To date, ADOT has solicited the opinions of public officials and held one round of public meetings. A second round of public meetings will begin next month.

Those meetings identified $42 billion in needs and spawned the recently failed attempt to bring a statewide 1-cent transportation tax to the November ballot.

Williams says that part of the upcoming public process will be determining each community's values. Participants are asked to bring their concerns and join in the conversation.

"What we have found so far is that rural areas are very in tune with the smart growth principles," Williams says. "What people have said in the Prescott region is that they do not want to become a second Phoenix."

The next public meeting will be on Nov. 17 at Yavapai College in Prescott. A firm time has yet to be set but according to Williams the meeting will be in the evening.

The results of the bqAZ study will be sent to the governor before January 2009.

Information on the bqAZ program is available at www.bqaz.gov.

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